THEY’LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS

Psalm 148:11-14 and John 13:31-35

“We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity will one day be restored. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

I confess. I’m of that generation which sang this song at every youth meeting and every Youth Rally – we called them Jesus Rallies back then – and every youth activity. And we believed what we sang. When we sang it in Pastor Dave and Lorraine Eshelman’s home in Atglen, Pennsylvania with Jackie playing the guitar and when we sang it in the back yard of my family home gathered together for a teen Bible Study and when we sang it in the park in the city of Lancaster with teenagers from all over the area – we believed what we were singing. We believed that everyone who saw us would know that we were Christians – that we were believers, that we were followers of Jesus – because of the love we had for others.

Looking back now – from the distance of a few years – I wonder – did we understand what we were singing? Or maybe the better question is this, had anyone shown us, modeled for us, what Christian love really is – and how we could live it in ways that others would see it in our lives.

On that night which we celebrated a month ago today with a Seder Meal and the Sacrament of Communion; on that night when Jesus sat around a table with his closest friends and shared so much with them; on that night before he went willingly to his death; Jesus said to his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And then, the very next day, Jesus demonstrated the depths of his love for others, all others, by giving his life.

Now I’m not saying that for others to “know we are Christians by our love” we have to sacrifice our lives. But I do believe that if others are to “know we are Christians by our love” we have to demonstrate that love in real, practical, genuine ways. Not for the purpose of being seen, but for the purpose of obeying Jesus’ commandment. And when we obey that commandment, others will see – and “know we are Christians by our love”.

I had wonderful adult youth leaders when I was a teenager – Bob and Eleanor Holtzhouser and John and Ann Bland and Dave and Lorraine Eshelman and others and I knew that they loved me and loved others. They shared their faith by being present with us as youth and teaching us lessons from the scriptures and sharing their lives with us. But, other than going with the church family to sing Christmas carols to shut-ins on Christmas eve and bringing canned goods for the Mt. Joy Home for the Elderly, I don’t remember being encouraged to “go out and show your love” in real, practical and genuine ways.

And when I attended Jesus Rallies and Tent Revivals as a teenager, I was often caught up in the emotion of the moment – of young men and women speaking of how horrible they had been, of how deeply they had been caught in the web of sin – and alcohol and drugs – and how
Jesus had come to them and loved them into following him. Those speakers were effective, they were sincere, they had genuinely had an experience of the love of Jesus – and they were sharing that with us. And as we sang “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love...” I’m sure that I felt the love of those up on the stage – and those around me – whether I knew them or not – but I left only with that. With a “feeling” of love – but with no direction, no guidance in how to share that love, express that love, demonstrate that love, model that love in ways that would allow others to “know we are Christians by our love.”

I say that, not to be critical, but to remind us that Jesus did more than talk about love – he acted out his love. And I believe that’s what he calls us to do as well.

But we know that. We know that we are to “love one another”. We have known that since childhood. And we know that loving someone involves more than just speaking the words, “I love you”. Loving someone involves demonstrations of that love in acts of kindness. And we know that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to love everyone. As Madeleine L’Engle wrote, “If you’re going to care about the fall of the sparrow, you can’t pick and choose who’s going to be the sparrow. It’s everybody.” And everybody means everybody. No limits. No one is “in” our circle of those we love while others are “outside” of that circle. Everyone is “in”. Everybody means everybody!

And again, we know that. It has been preached to us in sermons and taught to us in Bible Studies and contemplated by us in our own times of Bible Study and devotions. We know that we are to love everybody – and we know that we are to show that love in real, practical and genuine ways.

I heard the story yesterday on NPR of Cameron Lyle. He is on the Track and Field Team at the University of New Hampshire and two years ago - when he was a Sophomore – he joined the National Bone Marrow Registry. This week he received a call – he is a match for a person he has never met. He is in the midst of the Track and Field season of his Senior year – and the bone marrow transplant has to be done NOW – meaning he will not be able to finish the track year. Cameron Lyle is giving his bone marrow. He said, “The choice was clear, a few more shot put throws for me, for several more years of life for someone else.”

Bede Griffiths reminds us that "The love of Jesus Christ is not a mild benevolence: it is a consuming fire." A “consuming fire” leaves nothing behind – and in our love we should leave no one behind.

As we’re seeing in our study of the book of Acts in our Sunday Night Live @ 5 worship, the earliest Christians WERE known by the love they demonstrated to others – particularly to the poor, the outcasts, the oppressed of their communities. They voluntarily shared their resources to the extent that no one among them was in need. John, who was with Jesus on the night he offered this “new Commandment” to love one another, later wrote letters to those in the newly formed, growing Christian churches, and he wrote, “If we have the world’s goods and see our brothers and sisters in need, yet close our hearts against them, how does God’s love abide in us? Let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth.” And as we read two weeks ago from the letter of James, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you
says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that. So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” And as Paul wrote to those in the early Christian community in Corinth, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” In these words, written to Christians in the early years of this developing faith, John and James and Paul echoed the words Jesus spoke on the night of his last supper with his disciples, hours before he was arrested, betrayed, denied, beaten and crucified. John and James who were there, and Paul who was met by Jesus on the road to Damascus, knew that those early Christians needed to know what Jesus meant when he said “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” How had Jesus loved them? The answer to that question would provide them with the example they needed in loving others.

Jesus loved people where they were. He did not insist that they change, that they reach some level of spiritual maturity before he loved them or that they agree to certain principles before he loved them or that they agree with his teachings about God before he loved them. Jesus didn’t even wait until they changed in positive ways before he loved them. He loved Matthew and Zacchaeus while they were tax collectors cheating the people. He loved the Pharisees while they challenged him and sought to discredit him. He loved those who nailed him to the cross and displayed that love through his words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. Jesus loved people where they were.

That doesn’t mean that he didn’t yearn for people to change – but he knew that trying to force that change or guilting them into change would not bring about a lasting change. Lasting change would only come through loving them even if and when they did not return that love.

And Jesus was persistent. He did not give up on people.

There was a young man who was determined to win the affection of a lady who refused to even talk to him anymore. He decided that the way to her heart was through mail (this was obviously before email and Facebook and tweets and twitter), so he began writing love letters. He wrote a love letter to her every day. Six times a week she received a love letter in the mail from him. When she didn’t respond he increased his output to three letters every day. In all he wrote over seven hundred letters. And she wound up marrying the mailman.

But you have to admire his persistence! Do we have that same persistence when it comes to loving those whom we find unlovable (in our judgment)? Are we willing to go to whatever lengths necessary to love all others. That’s what Jesus did – and he is our example.

Jesus loved others even when they did not return that love.

Little Chad was a shy, quiet 2nd grader, smaller than the other boys, not athletic, not very good with social skills. One day he came home from school and told his mother he wanted to make Valentine cards for everyone in his class. Her heart sank. She thought “I wish he wouldn’t do that!” because she had watched the children when they walked home from school.
Her Chad was always behind all the others. They laughed and played and hung on to each other and talked to each other. But Chad was never included. But she decided she would go along and night after night, Chad painstakingly made thirty-five Valentines.

Valentine’s Day came and Chad was beside himself with excitement! He carefully packed the Valentines and bolted out the door. His Mom decided to bake his favorite cookies and serve them warm with a glass of milk when he got home. It hurt her to think he might not get many valentines, maybe none at all. When she heard the other children on the street outside she looked out the window and sure enough the others came laughing and having the best time – and as always Chad was in the rear. She fully expected him to burst into tears as soon as he got inside. His arms were empty and when she opened the door she choked back tears.

“Mommy has some warm cookies and milk for you.”

But he hardly heard her words. He just marched right on by, his face aglow, and all he could say was:

“Not a one...not a one.” Her heart sank. And then he added, “I didn’t forget a one, not a single one.”

That’s the love Jesus was talking about when he sat with the disciples in an upper room. That’s the love Jesus is talking about when he says to us, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Now there are those – I’ve heard them – who take Jesus’ words here and say, “He was in that upper room with his closest disciples and he was talking about them loving one another – not loving all others. He was talking about us loving other Christians – not those people who aren’t Christian.” I’ve heard people twist Jesus’ commandment in this way. But Jesus followed his commandment saying, “By this everyone will know you are my disciples....” Friends, people are not going to know we are disciples of Jesus Christ if we love only those who are like us or agree with us or think like us or act like us or believe like us. They are going to know we are Christ’s disciples only if they see us loving all others – and working in concrete, practical ways to help and support and encourage and serve all others. Only then will they know we are Christians by our love.

Just last night some of us from this church family and others from various faith traditions gathered at the Muslim Mosque for prayer, and a time of fellowship and getting to know one another, and learning about the many similarities in our faiths. Yes, we have differences, yet we are still called to love one another – and we do.

And why is it important that others know we are Christian? Because we love and follow and serve Jesus Christ who demonstrated love in every word he spoke and in every action he took. We love and follow and serve Jesus Christ who was “God among us” and on the cross demonstrated the depths of God’s love for all humanity – for every person ever born or ever to be born. We love and follow and serve Jesus Christ who is the best example the world has ever
seen of pure love. That’s why we strive to love – as he loved us – so that we can be a positive member of the community he built and guides through his Spirit.

I believe that Jesus would agree with the words of Augustine: “What does it look like? It has hands to help others, feet to hasten to the poor and needy, eyes to see misery and want, ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of all. That is what love looks like.” Amen.

Let’s pray…. Lord Jesus, you command us to love as you love. Give us the patience, the persistence, the perseverance to love as you love – to love all as you love all. Amen.